

Eulogy for Monika Wood

January 26, 2014

Monika and I met quite by accident in the mid-1980s. We happened both to be sitting outside the student center at Rutgers University in Camden, just across the river from Philadelphia. Somehow we struck up a conversation and it turned out, rather amazingly, that we were both planning to attend the same lecture across the river in about an hour's time. I had brought along a sandwich to eat on the way, and I shared it with Monika. According to Monika ever since, that did it. I fed her. She was hooked.

(By the way, I've never been able to remember what was in that sandwich. If I could have, I might have made a fortune selling it as a love potion. What a loss.)

In any case, it actually took us a while to discover our mutual attraction. But as I came to know Monika more, I began to understand the appeal of a story that is, at least in part, obviously a myth. Monika grew up in postwar Germany, where food and just about everything else was scarce. An apple was a treasure, a banana a forbidden dream. The only way people could survive was to band together, pooling their talents and whatever material possessions they still had, to barter for the means of survival. Such an early childhood—and here I recapitulate what Monika said many times--instilled an appreciation of the little things of life and of the bonds of family and community. The materialism and selfish individualism that followed later had little appeal for her.

There is some irony in this, but Monika was also the product of a postwar educational system that was instituted by the Americans to break what they perceived as the tendency of Germans blindly to accept authority. Question Authority! was the mantra of the US-sponsored education that Monika and her generation grew up with. And many, including Monika, took this mantra to heart, wherever they ended up living.

Of course, where she was living then was at home, in a family dominated by a loving but strict father. Questioning authority at home was out of the question. Love came to the rescue. Monika met and fell in love with a young and dashing American GI, Daniel Deppen. They married—with her father's reluctant blessing--and she came to the U.S. on Thanksgiving day, 1965, at the age of 18. This was the time of rising worldwide opposition to the war in Vietnam, but the attitude she encountered among her new in-laws was very much “America, love it or leave it.” She often said she felt Americans could benefit from the kind of education they so successfully gave postwar Germans.

In any case, Monika and her husband quickly went on to have three fine sons, Dan, John and Dave, raising them in a wonderfully loving way in Willingboro, New Jersey. Willingboro was one of the few successful examples at that time of a racially integrated community, north or south. She was proud to live there and raise her children there.

Dan has given you a nice flavor of her life during this period with what she lovingly called her three stooges.

Years later, I traveled with Monika to Atlanta, where she presented an outstanding and well-received paper on how bad policy choices and other forces had eventually and tragically undermined—sometimes accidentally and sometimes intentionally--Willingboro's interracial success. By then she had returned to school after raising her three sons, eventually obtaining both a BA in history from Rutgers University and a master's degree in social gerontology at the University of Pennsylvania. Other changes ensued, and she and I were married in 1996.

I think it's fair to say that it's not rocket science for anyone who has known us together to figure out that we had a full and wonderful marriage for these past 18 years. If I think about the special attributes that Monika brought to our time together, two words consistently come to mind: passion and commitment.

Monika was passionate about most things she cared about, but most of all, I think, family and social justice. Our life together revolved more around our children and grandchildren than anything else. But Monika never lost sight of how privileged our lives were, compared to the many victims of social inequality and injustice. And she never lost her desire to do something about that.

One way that commitment was evident was in a multi-year research project that she was project manager for that studied polio survivors, many of whom were tragically becoming afflicted with a second version of their terrible disease: post-polio syndrome. But Monika was not content just to collect data. She befriended many of her interviewees; we visited many of them regularly, and looking over old photos for this memorial service, I was struck by how many Christmas pictures show a polio survivor in a wheelchair with us and our family. But she went beyond this, pulling bureaucratic strings to get them stair lifts, affordable handicap-accessible housing, access to health care, and much more. She fundamentally changed the life situation of many of these proud polio survivors.

And when we moved to Nelson County, she continued in the same vein, driving people to dialysis, visiting the elderly and infirm in their trailers, providing websites and technological backup to churches and community groups, such as Unity in Community. She was as close to an angel as anyone I have ever known.

And the wonderful thing—so profoundly, deeply moving and rewarding—is how these same people in need, these same churches, these same community groups—have showered both Monika and me with love and encouragement and practical support since her cancer diagnosis in January 2013. This truly kept Monika's spirits high and kept that

wonderful smile on her face, no matter what was going on inside her body. She faced death with extraordinary courage and grace, and has provided a model for us all. I cannot thank you all enough for that.

Nancy Welker, who changed our life when she stopped by one day in 2009 and introduced us not only to our neighbors but to Grace Church, gave Monika a few days before she died three beautiful feathers. Nancy, with her usual wonderful irreverence, said that if Monika encountered any problem at the Pearly Gates, she could use these feathers to fly over them.

I like to think that perhaps Monika will use the feathers to fly back over the gates to be with all of us in her example of a wonderfully passionate and gracious woman, who can inspire us to listen to our better nature and carry on her efforts to make this world a more humane, just, and loving place. Let us mourn our loss, but let us also welcome her spirit to remain in our hearts and minds.